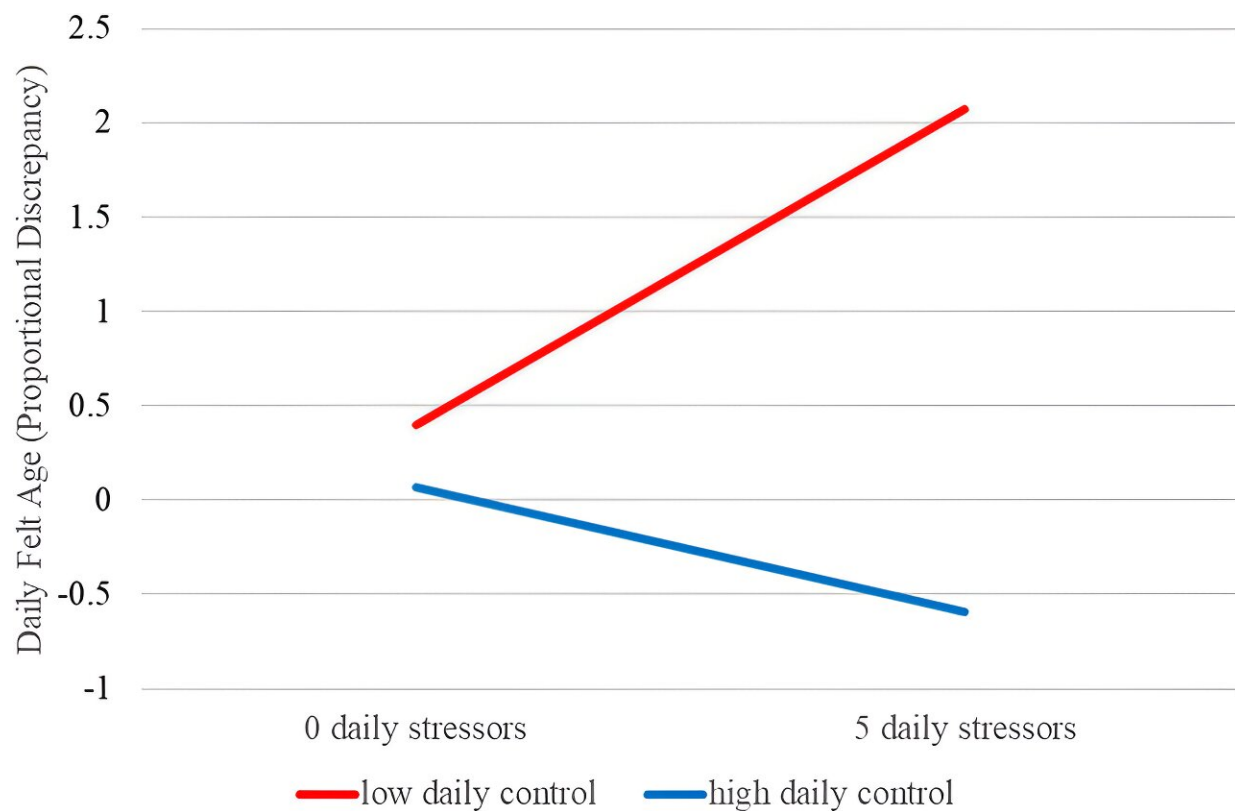


It's not just you: Young people look, feel older when they're stressed

March 4 2024, by Matt Shipman



Significant interaction of daily stressors and daily control predicting daily felt age. Predicted points were generated using low ($M - 1$ SD) and high ($M + 1$ SD) values of daily control. The observed range of daily stressors from daily reports was used to represent low and high values of daily stressors. Simple slopes were tested through estimate statements in SAS. The slope for low daily control is significantly different from 0 ($b = 0.45$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = 0.0043$, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 0.14, 0.76) but the slope for high daily control is not significantly different from 0 ($b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.1889$, 95% CI: -0.70, 0.14). A

score of 0 on daily felt age indicates no difference between chronological age and felt age. Positive scores indicate feeling older than chronological age, whereas negative scores indicate feeling younger than chronological age. Credit: *Mental Health Science* (2024). DOI: 10.1002/mhs2.56

A new study finds younger adults look and feel older on stressful days—but only on days when they also feel they have relatively less control over their own lives.

"There's substantial research that tells us stress makes older adults feel their age, or even feel older than they actually are," says Shevaun Neupert, corresponding author of the study and a professor of psychology at North Carolina State University.

"The literature tells us that when seniors feel older than they actually are, that is associated with a host of negative health outcomes. However, there is little research examining this issue in younger adults—people in their teens, 20s and 30s. Having a deeper understanding of this phenomenon across all age groups could help us develop interventions that protect our mental and physical well-being."

"This work may be particularly timely, as stress researchers are seeing an increase in the amount of stress younger adults are experiencing now when compared to the amount of stress previous generations experienced when they were young."

For this study, researchers collected data from 107 younger adults between the ages of 18 and 36 (mean age was around 20). Study participants completed a [baseline survey](#) followed by a detailed daily survey for eight consecutive days. The daily surveys were designed to capture the amount of stress they were experiencing each day, how much

control they felt they had over their lives that day, and how old they felt and looked on that day.

"The key finding was that on days when study participants reported experiencing higher levels of stress than they normally did, they also reported looking and feeling older," Neupert says. "However, this was only true on days when study participants also reported feeling that they had less control over their lives than they normally did."

"It's also worth noting that both the levels of stress and the levels of control were relative."

In other words, a person could report having relatively low levels of stress—but if the level of stress was higher than they normally reported, researchers saw the effect. By the same token, people could report feeling they still had significant levels of control over their lives—but if it was less control than they normally reported, researchers saw the effect.

"For one thing, this tells us that the phenomenon of stress making people feel older is not limited to [older adults](#)—it happens to [young people](#) too," Neupert says.

"It's also important because we know that experiencing [chronic stress](#) over time can have adverse effects and that people generally report increasing levels of stress as they move from young adulthood to midlife—their 40s and 50s," Neupert says.

"If these young people are already experiencing historically high levels of stress for their age, and that stress is affecting how old they feel, it will be important for us to pay close attention to the markers we use to assess stress-related physical and mental health for this generation."

The paper, "[The Effect of Control Beliefs on the Relationship between Daily Stressors and Subjective Age in Younger Adults](#)," is published [open access](#) in the journal *Mental Health Science*.

More information: Sofia E. Lee et al, The effect of control beliefs on the relationship between daily stressors and subjective age in younger adults, *Mental Health Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/mhs2.56](#)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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